

## **Explain the development of the Greek representation of the human figure from Archaic to Hellenistic period**

The human figure developed a vast amount from the archaic to Hellenistic period. From features becoming more defined and realistic, to foreshortening, to idealisation and finally to naturalism the human figure developed and changed as did the Greek society.

The sculptures produced during the archaic period had strong oriental and Cretan influences, the Homeric tradition also took part in the way art was represented. Although art was jolly and fun it was rigid and the figures seemed to have no expressions on their faces. Everything was very simple. A perfect example of an archaic period example of the representation of the human figure is the vase of Dipylon. This vase contains paintings of various figures; it was made eight centuries BC. It is 4ft 11inches tall. The top part of the vase depicts a funeral scene in its simplest form, the figures seem to be stereotyped. Their bodies are merely rigid shapes and their heads blobs with no definite shape or definition.

The abstract and simple way of depicting the human figure gradually changed and the Greeks finally tried to attempt to define the human anatomy. The Made in 600BC are perfect examples of what the Greeks were attempting to do. In this sculpture the artist tried to create the knees on the figure, although the attempt was not a very successful one it shows determination and showed a contrast from the Egyptians. The Egyptians were a culture that wanted to get everything right the first time and were not willing to experiment therefore they did not progress much in art. The Greeks because of their confidence to experiment, freed the figure's limbs, experimented with the torso and went beyond the Egyptians, they had a spirit of discovery.

A sculpture made by Myron in 450 BC shows this freedom beginning to appear in Greek art. The sculpture, which is called the 'Discobolus', had various copies made giving us an example of what the original figure was like. The athlete is getting prepared to throw a discus by bending down and swinging his arm back as if to gather a great force to throw the discus. The position in which he was depicted looked so convincing that various modern athletes attempted throwing the discus in this way, but it was proved that this method of throwing was not an ideal one. The body of the figure is well defined and detailed although the Egyptian influence is still present. This figure shows the gradual change from the archaic to the classical period. The statues are now less severe and are acquiring a sense of proportion. Idealisation starts to take over as the artists now started to think that that sculptures of Gods had to be perfect.

The classical period can be identified between two historical events, the first Persian war in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC and the reign of Philip the Second of Macedon. As a result of this war the Greeks became the dominant power and won superiority. This power unified the Greeks and allowed them to think about things in a different manner. This was shown through their work. They believed in idealisation and naturalism and felt that a sculpture had to have life. A philosopher of that time called Socrates stated that "the qualities of seeming alive has the strongest visual appeal." Due to this point of view the figures developed and although the function of art ceased to be political and religious reasons it was now starting to be admired for its own merits.

In the small temple of the Goddess of Victory there were various sculptures that portrayed the delicate defined characteristics of the classical period. One of the sculptures found in this temple was the one of the Goddess of Victory, although her hands and head did not remain intact the refinement of the sculpture can still be seen. The sculpture consists of the Goddess tightening her loosed sandal as she walks. This is self-conscious action shows grace as the garment falls over her body. The clothing around her knees creates a great flowing pattern. The artist no longer portrays this figure as a Goddess, she seems to be depicted now as an ordinary woman. The point of view of the artist gradually changed therefore was creating a different style of sculpture.

An artist who represents this period the best is one called Praxiteles. One of his sculptures was called Hermes with the Young Dionysus, 340BC. This sculpture has lost its virility. In Praxiteles work all traces of rigidity have disappeared and this is seen through the God's relaxed posed which does not impair his dignity. Although the statue has the element of idealisation it still looks alive. Praxiteles' intention was not to take away the element of life but to include vitality into the statues he produced, they became full of life in an idealised world.

The pedimental sculptures in the Temple of Zeus at Olympia are another good example of classical art. Apollo can be seen at the apex of the fifty feet pediment. He stands in the centre of this scene boldly side glancing. This depiction of Apollo shows that he is in control. The centaurs and lapiths are drunk and this makes Apollo the divine order. It represents culture over savagery. He is the victory and this is portrayed through his beauty. Again this sculpture is based very much on idealisation.

Idealisation started to disappear as years went by which led to the start of the Hellenistic period. Hellenistic art is wild and impressive and the sculptors who produced this work seemed to be losing interest in magic and religion and instead were now concentrating on how to depict an atmosphere of tension, drama and energy in a sculpture.

Three Hellenistic sculptures are those of Venus of Milo, Apollo and Medici Venus. The figures were made out of marble, which was used in a sensuous

way. The artist was now looking at their individuality and showing off their talents.

Although idealisation of faces did seem to die a death there still was the use of some idealisation. This is shown through various sculptures including one called the Hellenistic Ruler, 150BC. Here the artist used someone's body and the head of the ruler. The body is now fleshy unlike in the classical period. The head in fact looks too small for the body.

Over the years the portrayal of the human figure changed due to the influences like the Egyptian and the desire of the ancient Greek artists to experiment. The figure gradually progressed in a short space of time from a rigid, simplistic creation to beautiful works of art, which made a profound impact in the history of art.